

Strategic Funding Workbook

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Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your hard work in the arts. I know the time and energy that you devote to the arts benefits our children, our community and our citizens.

This short workbook on funding strategies is intended to assist you to think about the big questions related to funding projects within your organization. The secret to sustainability is a combination of nuanced artistic direction, a search for artistic excellence, as well as structural ingredients like strategic plans, external funding, and communications.

More comprehensive opportunities in non-profit arts training can be found by connecting with a number of support organizations that offer professional development. Please check out opportunities at **National Arts Strategies** or **Fractured Atlas**. For professional development within your field, any of the national associations provide valuable training at their annual conferences. Here is a sample of service organizations with specialized training during conference sessions and/or pre-conference institute opportunities:

- Alternate Roots
- Americans for the Arts
- Arts Education Partnership (AEP)
- Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP)
- Dance USA or National Dance Education Organization (NDEO)
- The League of American Orchestras
- National Arts Education Association
- The National Guild for Community Arts Education (see their Community Arts Education Leadership Institute)
- National Association for Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) (see Leadership Institute, Advocacy Leadership Institute, Intercultural Leadership Institute)
- National Association for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) (see the Arts Leadership Institute and the Innovation Studio)
- Salzburg Seminars (Global Forum for Young Cultural Leaders)
- Theater Communications Group (TCG) (see Spark Leadership Program)
- Virginia Commission for the Arts (Annual Conference)

I hope this workbook will be helpful in reflecting on your practice as a non-profit arts leader.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sarah Bainter Cunningham
Executive Director, Arts Research Institute at VCUarts

Developing Funding Strategies

- Try to submit 1-2 applications per year
- Try to develop a core group of 2-3 people to work on an application: individuals with arts expertise, budget expertise, someone to assist with proofreading and/or running around to collect information for application.
- Try to develop a network of colleagues who are working on similar applications who might know shortcuts, hints, and how to game the system.
- 30% of projects are generally funded. In other words, it may take 3 tries before your application is successful.

Project Dreams / Aspirations:

Funders love to see projects that are very aspirational and allow citizens to realize ambitious goals. However, it does take some brainstorming to think about / explore these goals.

Brainstorm the most exciting project for you and your community:

Brainstorm obstacles to this project:

Brainstorm how you might “game” these obstacles:

Short Term Goals:

- Distinguish individual development goals from foundation application goals
- Pick 1-2 application dates for the next 12-36 months
- Develop a timeline to achieve application submission.
- Make this work part of the core work of your team: assign someone in your organization the task of researching the new funding opportunities as they emerge, and leading application efforts.

My Goals / My Organization's Goals:

Long Term Goals:

- Begin to develop a 5 year application plan
- Link this application plan to the strategic planning at the board level
- Begin to develop a realistic projection for annual foundation income
- Begin to develop strategies to articulate impact/results or collect information about the effects of your projects, so that you will have supporting material for future applications.
- How do these goals dovetail with other organizational goals?

My Goals / My Organization's Goals:

Dream Projects + Funding Trends

Your project proposal will be framed by external conversations at work in the cultural industry. Assess whether you link to these external missions. If your project does not relate to the current cultural investments, then take a stand and explain why it is important to be doing something different. I provide some prompts below related to current cultural concerns:

How does your dream project seek artistic excellence or advancing artistic footprint of your organization/community?

How might your work advance diversity? Does your organization have a diversity plan that might align with your vision? Does your project support underrepresented individuals or communities?

Can your dream project integrate with non-arts partners (education, health, business, urban planning)? In what ways? I.e., how does the arts benefit exceed simply art-making and audience participation?

Can your project contribute to “creative placemaking” and seek support from your municipality?

Can your project improve conditions for artists as part of the creative workforce?

Can your project contribute to quality of life in other ways (for individuals who encounter the project, encounter project dissemination, or might learn from you in other ways)?

Can your project demonstrate in-road or innovations in education or arts education?

Can your project contribute to understanding how to further measurement of arts and arts ecosystems impacts/outcomes?

Can your project contribute to Arts Research in a fundamental way? And/or – can you partner with like-minded organizations to use your case studies and local efforts to develop research progress?

Project Elements

Once you have determined which projects are most competitive for external elements, begin to collect information on project elements. Shape these elements to create the highest quality project possible within your community.

Title:

What is the title of this project? Is it memorable and easy to communicate?

People:

Who are the people that should be involved in the project? Locally? Statewide?

Do they have the qualifications to conduct the project?

Have you formally invited them to participate *before* the application process?

Do they have enough time/ability to do the work required in the project? And, can you pay them appropriately?

Does your project merit an advisory board? Would it be helpful to have advisory representatives from outside your community (people who have done similar projects or can bring needed expertise to your table)?

Structure or Project Design:

The project design is the underlying architecture to support your goals.

What are your project goals and what structure will allow you to realize these goals?

What happens at the beginning, middle, and end of the project?

Does this structure make sense or it is sequenced in some way to insure success?

Can you anticipate weaknesses in this structure or things that will prevent you from achieving your goals? If so, can you build a structure to avoid these weaknesses?

Are you orienting staff / participants at the beginning of the project? Are you collecting any preliminary data at the beginning?

Do you have a period for feedback in the middle of the project?

Are you collecting surveys or information at the end of the project, that might be used to improve your work and in any reports to stakeholders?

Is it necessary for the audience/community to understand the arc of your project, or is this something that is simply embedded in the project design? If the audience needs to know, do you have the arc represented in public materials and communications?

Timeline

What is the timeline of your project activities?

Does the pacing of your timeline conflict with external forces that might affect audience participation (such as school schedules, other local festivals/events, etc.)?

Have you provided enough planning time and/or stakeholder meetings throughout the project?

Can you depict your timeline in an easy-to-view format, so that all participants can quickly get the same information?

Does your timeline include tasks and who is responsible for those tasks?

Have you added funding deadlines to your timeline and given yourself enough lead time to prepare applications?

How does the timeline link up to existing grant opportunities, such as a VCA grant or an NEA grant?

Budget

Your budget must be integrally linked to all project elements and support the goals of your project. As a result, it cannot be developed independently from a project narrative that explains people, project design, timeline, etc.

Your budget is a numerical narrative *equally or more important than the written narrative*. Why? Because when you begin to ask for funding support, the budget will demonstrate that you have some skill in managing money.

Expenses:

How much will it cost to deliver this project? Begin to tabulate itemized costs for the project. Be aware that the funder will have rules about expenses. For example, most funders *do not fund* development activities or alcohol.

Project budgets might include:

- Personnel (percentage of time of existing staff, consultants, artists fees, etc). Make sure that artists or teaching artists are paid a reasonable wage.

Please note that most arts funders *do not want to see projects that expect artists to volunteer*. Artists-as-volunteers is systematically de-values the work of the arts.

- Equipment. Provide realistic estimates based on your region.
- Supplies / Materials. These are usual consumable items.
- Exhibitions/ Production Costs.
- Facilities.
- Communications/Publications/Marketing/Web Design.
- Travel. Use GSA.gov stated estimates for per diem, hotel and travel rates for cities around the country.
- Evaluation. Projects may include outside evaluators or fees related to survey administration. Education projects should speak to evaluation somewhere within the project description.

Revenues:

What sorts of income will support your project? Be aware, funders like to see some local investments as evidence of the project value within your community or even your state.

Project revenues might include:

- “In-kind” revenues. Many organizations do not have “cash match” required for some funding opportunities. You can propose “in-kind” matches. Offer staff time, facilities, volunteer time, or other donations as evidence of commitment to the project.
- Ticket or merchandise sales.
- Donated funds targeted to this project.
- Grant awards already committed (for this project).
- Grant applications under review (for this project).

Evaluation

When developing a project with multiple stakeholders, one must have an objective process for determining whether 1) you are achieving your goals, 2) you are responsibly meeting the needs of the stakeholders, 3) you can predict fatal flaws before they emerge (staff, budget issues, etc) and/or 4) you have a feedback loop for continuous improvement.

While evaluation can feel like a luxury or an onerous obligation, it should provide you with an insurance policy. Why?

The evaluation:

- Shows that you care enough about the project to undergo critical evaluation
- Should directly serve your needs and provide you with another set of “eyes” on the project.

- Evaluations conducted intermittently throughout a project (from surveys to stakeholder discussions) allow you to adapt and improve the project midstream.
- Evaluations allow you to crowd-source and collect great ideas that might come from outside of your organization.
- Evaluations allow you to collect anonymous information, which could demonstrate hidden excellence as well as concealed flaws.
- Evaluations can give you new, dynamic vocabulary to speak about your work, coming directly from your audiences/participants.

How do I do this?

- Brainstorm with fellow organizations or similar projects that have conducted evaluations. How did they do it?
- Seek a range of tools – from simple surveys to more complex methodologies provided by external evaluators.
- Contact academic institutions for assistance.
- Contact consultants for assistance.
- Ask your favorite organizations (throughout the US and in your field) to send you samples of completed evaluations and/or surveys.
- Consider social media as a potent source for feedback.
- Evaluations usually have to be tailor-fit to a project.

Social Media / Communications / Dissemination

Your project should have some complementary communications strategy. This can range from communications that will announce or advertise your event/project/activity, to information that provide public access to current activities, to communications that report out after the project has been completed.

- Consider mainstream social media outlets: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, You Tube.
- Determine how the project will appear on your website.
- Consider presenting the results of your work/project at a relevant conference.
- Consider producing a report / summary on the outcomes of your proposed project.
- Document the project throughout, in order to have photo/video/text for reporting but also to have work samples for future grants applications.
- Consider developing a blog or vblog channel to share stories about your project.
- Consider inviting a social media assistant, consultant, or expert, to help guide your online strategy.
- Make sure you are reaching audiences that you intend to reach through appropriate outlets.

How to Apply to the National Endowment for the Arts

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So you have a project that requires financial support. How do you know you are ready to apply to the NEA for funding? Then, if you think you're ready, then what are the top ten tricks to submitting a solid application?

How many applications can you submit?

As primary applicant:

- Only one application in the ArtWorks category
- Additional application in the Media Arts category
- Additional applications allowed for special categories: Research, Creativity Connects.

As partner or participant:

- If you have project partners, they can serve as the lead on a collaborative project. This will allow you to participate in additional NEA submissions.
- There is no limit on applications where you remain a participant/partner but not the lead. However, quality wins over quantity!

Does my project qualify?

- The project is one of your best in your entire portfolio
- You have some track record of having piloted the concept/program/event
- You have outsiders to attest to the value of the project
- You have gotten some support outside your organization (even if that is in-kind donations of time, space, buy-in, or other resources – doesn't have to be cash! Could be endorsements by local leaders.)
- You have some way of explaining why this project is singular to your local area, to your audiences, and therefore within a pool of other competing projects.
- You have a sense that how your project might be viewed in a national cohort, and you have a sense of strengths and weaknesses.

Are you ready?

- You are *not* applying for organizational support. (NEA supports *projects* not organizations.)
- You have read through the NEA Guidelines.
- You know which NEA discipline category best fits your project.
- You registered for grants.gov 8-10 weeks before the application is due.

- You completed your System Award Management (SAM) registration process or updated your contact email in SAM at least 5 weeks before the deadline.
 - In a university, you planned for university application processing through your Office of Sponsored Research.
 - In a university or large organization, you checked whether the “one application per year” limit has been assigned to your project.
 - If you’ve never written an NEA submission, you have at least 10 weeks to work on the application and familiarize yourself with what is required.
 - You did not take another grant narrative and cut and paste!
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- You know *who* will be involved in the project, which artists, participants/target population, project managers or staff.
 - You have developed a draft timeline with a breakdown of project activities
 - If you are asking for two years support, activities are *not* repeated in the second year.
 - You can articulate your project in terms of artistic excellence or artistic merit. If your project is involved in other goals, you might want to look at different funding sources.
 - You have articulated or demonstrated how your project has national significance or could be a national model in your field.
 - You have considered underserved populations related to your project.
 - You know how the project will be disseminated to the public.
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- You have matching funds.
 - Your match does not come from another federal agency.
 - Your budget items align with what is described in the project narrative
 - You’ve sought funding from local or state arts agencies, or other local partners. Perhaps in the year *before* you request NEA support.
 - You have letters of support or budget contributions (in-kind or cash) from primary project partners.
 - You have developed a draft budget.
 - You have checked the math in your budget, or made sure that all budget numbers in the application match. (Check
 - Your project budget is *smaller* than your organizational budget.
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- You have work samples. Do not use samples that are too long or over 3 years old, made for development purposes, or don’t demonstrate activity related to the project you are applying for.
 - You have spellchecked your submission.
 - Your submission does not exceed the page limits required for the application.
 - You have conducted national research to determine if there are national best practices for your kind of work.

- Please do not cut and paste writing from different authors into one project narrative.
- Grant authors are familiar with the art form or the vernacular of the discipline in order to make an argument for artistic excellence.
- Your application is not coming from an individual or a for-profit organization. These are not eligible.

More than ready

- You have begun planning your application submission at least 6 months in advance.
- At least some of your team has national experience, with credentials that reflect artistic excellence.
- You have sought and been successful in local and state grants competitions.
- Your state arts agency has funded the project or your organization.
- You have planned other grant applications to be submitted to support the same project, so that you have diverse investors.
- You know the NEA discipline category that fits your project. You have reviewed prior funded projects in that category to make sure that your work aligns with that category.
- You have several project partners that improve the quality of the project.
- Since you've submitted this project to other national, state, or local funders in the past, you have a sense of the potential weaknesses of your application and know how to address them.
- You or your staff have experience serving on a grant review panel, so have a sense of what panelist (on any arts panel) might be looking for.
- You have a strategy for serving underserved populations. You have developed this strategy in collaboration with said population.
- There is a balance between project budget and organizational budget that indicates that your organization can easily accomplish this project in addition its other responsibilities.
- Your budget is linked directly to the project, and you are not asking federal government to fund beverages, development staff, and fundraising events. These are not allowable. Check the budget instructions for allowable costs.
- For the required matching funds, you do not offer funds from another federal grant. This is not allowable.
- You've reviewed the "We Do Not Fund" section within your discipline to make sure your project and budget items within your project are eligible for NEA funding.

Headed for Success

- You've developed a 6-12 month plan to develop the grant submission.
- You have scheduled phone or in-person meetings with NEA staff.
- You've consulted with others who have submitted successful NEA application, preferably in the same discipline category.
- You have some evidence that your project can compete nationally, which includes relevant work samples that reflect high artistic quality.
- You have followed all the formatting instructions for documents to be submitted.
- You've respected panelist time and effort by creating a clean, well-written application and accessible work samples.
- For complex projects, you've used a Gantt chart or logic model to show the stages of the project or project planning.
- You've run the full, completed application by some experts to get their feedback and critique about the strengths and weaknesses of the project.
- You've openly addressed concerns that might be raised by panelists, in an effort to assist them in understanding your intentions. This is especially the case on projects with a high degree of difficulty. You've re-assured panelists that you have the team, the organization, and the artistic excellence to successfully complete the project.
- You have some experience serving the communities to be served by the project. You have thoroughly addressed how you will reach out to underserved communities.
- You have some experience with project evaluation, and have developed a reasonable tool to evaluate success of the project.
- You are prepared to submit your application 10 days prior to the deadline.
- You understand that NEA's limited budget prevents them from funding lots of wonderful projects. You've done everything possible to put together a solid application but also have a realistic sense that the competition is very tough.
- With your last application submission, you called the NEA staff to receive panel comments and feedback *even if you were awarded funding*. You addressed the panel's concerns and questions in your next application.

Top Ten Tricks: NEA Submissions

1. Stay Calm. Give yourself time.
2. Seek help from others. Federal and national grant applications are big projects. They require teams of people. Find colleagues who have experience with these sorts of applications who can give you moral support and coaching. Contact the NEA specialist, but allow for lots of time to schedule an appointment. They are your civil servants but they are very busy! When you get their time, respect it. Know the details of your project and come to the meeting with very clear questions about how to improve your application. Be on time and conclude the meeting on time. Send them thank-you notes! You may be entering a long-term relationship with NEA regardless of whether you are funded in this round of grants.
3. Be authentic to your community and your project. Try not to alienate the best, most particular features of your organization and community. Sometimes you need others to help you see local opportunities or what makes your artistic community singular! Highlight these and show how they should have a voice in the national conversation on artistic excellence.
4. Be super-organized. Pulling together an NEA application requires a great deal of coordination between people, budgets, and documents.
5. Be good at developing budgets. If this is not an area of expertise, find someone to help you. Budgets are descriptive accounts of your project that are just as powerful as narrative accounts. It is essential that the budget supports and fleshes out details of the project articulated in the narrative. It is essential that your budget demonstrate that you will be a good shepherd of federal funds. Mistakes and confusions in the budget can suggest that you are not prepared to manage external funding of this nature.
6. Be prepared to fail when you first apply. The NEA allows you to call the Specialist to receive panel comments. Always follow-up with the NEA staff to learn how the panelists reacted to your project. Even if you were awarded a grant, the panelists may have had serious concerns. You might have been the last ranked application for funding! Communicate with the wonderful and caring NEA staff to keep in touch with how the process works and how you are doing with grants submissions.
7. Keep the NEA criteria of Artistic Excellence and Artistic Merit in the forefront of your mind. If panelists “rank” these criteria on a score from 1-10, ask an arts professional to give you a ranking to get a sense of how a well-informed stranger might perceive your project. Be familiar with NEA Outcomes (Creation, Engagement, Learning, Livability) and know how your project fits in these outcomes.

8. Collect work samples over a period of time to show how your projects develop. Work samples will be different depending on your discipline. Know how to put together a polished work sample that speaks to the excellence of your work and/or demonstrates how your project will contribute to the creation of works of artistic excellence, provide models for engagement, demonstrate arts learning, or depict how your project contributes to livability.
9. Keep an acute eye on national arts trends. Understand how your project fits or does not fit into these trends. Be able to explain your project accordingly – whether that is in keeping with interests of the NEA’s current chairperson, the Office of the President, or even national trends within your artistic discipline. NEA likes to see that projects are responding to challenges and concerns in the field. Funded projects become models of best practices or give us new ideas for delivering the arts in America.
10. Tune into your visionary inner American, to understand how your project might show how “Art Works” in the United States. Remember, you are applying to a federal agency determined to serve all Americans. How does your project help NEA realize that mission? To better understand the NEA, go to conference presentations from NEA staff and/or attend online webinars to learn more about their focal areas and targeted funding streams.

Shape a polished NEA application, but also keep mind other national arts organizations that might allow you to achieve that excellence through funding, successful community engagement, or artistic experiment and achievement. Seek national associations that work to support your discipline. They will also help you develop your vision and achieve your goals.

U.S. arts infrastructure depends on grand efforts by many artistic Americans. Funding from the NEA would be an important growth opportunity for your organization, and assist you in garnering national visibility. However, NEA funding would only be part of a general strategy to make your organization thrive, to find ways to deliver high quality arts experiences to audiences, and to contribute to building American creative culture.

Overview of Funding Sources:

Please remember that submitting applications is an act that *demonstrates the needs in our communities for arts funding*, even if you are not awarded the grant in this round.

State Funding Goals:

VA Commission for the Arts
VA Foundation for the Humanities
Family Foundations
Community Foundations
Corporate Foundations
Cultureworks / Local Arts Agencies
University Partnerships

Regional Funding Goals:

MidAtlantic Arts Foundation
University partnerships

National Funding Goals:

Depends on artistic discipline
National Endowment for the Arts
Ford Foundation
Mellon Foundation
Kresge Foundation
Getty Trust
Warhol Foundation
Future of Music Foundation
+many more...

Cross-Sector Opportunities:

Please remember that you are not limited to arts funders. If your organization has other partners/impacts, you can apply to other sources:

- Urban Development / Creative Placemaking Funders
- Community Development Funders
- Arts/Health Funders
- Education Funders
- Federal Agencies: NEH, NSF, DOJ.

Helpful Websites:

- Grantmakers in the Arts
- Foundation Center
- NYFA Source (for artists)
- <http://arts.vcu.edu/research/for-faculty/faculty-deadlines/>

Journalism about cultural policy and arts practices:

To remain current and competitive, it is helpful to take advantage of reporting on trends and practices in arts and culture. Here are some important and respected sources reporting on arts and culture:

- Arts Journal Blogs (see Jumper)
- Createquity
- Future of Music Coalition
- NEA Art Works Blog
- WESTAF (specifically Barry's Blog)

Thank you.

For further information or support,
please contact the Arts Research Institute at VCUarts
at
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